



It's time to stop blaming the Highlands Act for every problem

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Where are the New Jersey Highlands? We all love the wild places like the Delaware Water Gap and High Point, towns like Newton and Flemington, and the farmlands in places like Lafayette and Readington. But none of those places are in the New Jersey Highlands, while places like Parsippany, Mahwah and Morristown are.

We think of the Highlands as roads through farms, forests and wetlands, but the Highlands also have busy intersections like Route 15 and Interstate 80 and Route 10 and Interstate 287. There are the Highlands of our hearts and imaginations, and then there are the Highlands as defined by the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act of 2004.

People confuse one for the other. The official Highlands consists of 88 towns in seven counties, covers more than 850,000 acres, has a population of more than 800,000 and provides water to more than 5 million New Jersey citizens. It is the water that ties the Highlands.

The mass of our population runs from the New York suburbs to the Philadelphia suburbs. We're the most densely populated state in the nation, an economic powerhouse with among the highest income in America. However, without the Highlands' water for drinking, fire safety, sewage, there is no economic powerhouse, no high incomes, no high real estate values.

In 2004 the Legislature moved to protect the threatened water resources of the Highlands. Certain areas in the Highlands were set aside to recharge groundwater by limiting development. Elsewhere communities were called on to apply modern planning tools to limit sprawl and preserve the watershed. But the act did something else.

The Highlands Act provided a scapegoat for politicians who had to raise taxes. Since 2004, all kinds of reasons caused higher taxes, reduced services, etc. on a local and county level. State aid has been reduced. The Great Recession and a collapse of real estate prices made higher local taxes inevitable, but many blamed the Highlands Act. Bashing the act became part of the political culture in the Highlands.

Blaming the Highlands Act for every problem led to unexpected consequences. Nothing lowers property values like bad press. Highlands opponents throw around figures like 836,000 acres that have been “taken” and “\$6 billion in equity” lost.

Yes, the Highlands are about 836,000 acres, but none has been “taken.” Most of the Highlands has already been developed. Some has been subject to building bans because of wetness, slope or other factors. Large areas are owned by federal, state, county or local authorities or are bodies of water. Much is preserved farmland. In fact, areas of developable land limited by Highlands regulation amount to less than 3.5 percent of the region.

Misimpressions of the Highlands have eliminated realistic perceptions that led to serious problems. Politicians who recognized the usefulness of the Highlands Act have been clobbered in elections. Those advocating sprawl development to lower taxes and create jobs have followed a delusional path. The days of 100-acre farms being converted to 200 tax-generating McMansions are gone. Growth in New Jersey is an urban/near suburban affair today.

The Highlands' identity crisis is real. Looking back to the sprawl of the '70s and '80s and hoping to be the new Bergen County is a mental block that prevents the Highlands from developing into the 21st-century powerhouse that it could be.

Day-tripper and weekend tourism, organic agriculture, transit centers, redevelopment, all pursued with 21st-century marketing, could bring an era of prosperity to the western Highlands. But first we need to set aside the idea that we are victims of big government; that we are due some huge compensation.

We need to see the future in the Highlands and act on it. The Highlands Act provides guidance and assistance to do this. All we need to do is make a 180-degree turn and face the future.

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George Stafford is outreach director for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.